



Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)



Image via CNN

OVERVIEW

GENERAL

ISIS is a Sunni Muslim rebel group that has control over territory in Iraq and Syria. Globally recognized as a 'terrorist group', ISIS, or more commonly known as the "Islamic State" (IS) has triggered dozens wars and other violent acts. ISIS, also known as ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) has carried out many brutal attacks and encouraged rebel fighting. They are now targeting foreign journalists and aid workers who they hold for ransom to help fund their terrorist group. ISIS uses social media to recruit new members and expand their terrorist recruitment. Their main goal is to establish a **caliphate**, which is a state governed under strict sharia law with theocratic-authoritarian rule. They plan to accomplish this through a militaristic terror campaign throughout the region that has already claimed over 19,00 civilian lives in Iraq alone since 2014.¹

GLOBALLY

As a jihadist organization, ISIS is trying to form a caliphate throughout the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Europe and West Asia. ISIS promotes the idea to other Muslims throughout the world that they will have a brotherhood within this extremist group. The United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom have seen men of their country fighting in this Islamic group as both **lone wolves** and moving overseas to fight in Syria. Fighters have US-equipped weapons being used to kill many innocent people. They are capturing innocent civilians all over the world, often killing them to make an example of infidels and dissidents. The United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, and France are all taking steps toward stopping their

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2016/01/19/middleeast/iraq-civilian-death-toll/>



military campaign and recruitment.²

SYRIA

The civil unrest that has led to civil war in Syria began during the Arab Spring uprising in 2011. There was a call for the fall of **President Bashar al-Assad's regime**. Assad's assault on protesters escalated the situation and led to the formation of the Free Syrian Army, an armed rebel group with the intention of toppling Bashar al-Assad. In January 2012, the al-Nusra front was created by Abu Mohammed al-Joulani and established as al-Qaeda in Syria. By March the al-Nusra front was the strongest rebel group fighting against Assad and trying to establish Islamic law in rebel held territories. In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi released a statement claiming the merger of ISIS and the al-Nusra front, a merger denied by al-Joulani. This announcement and subsequent denial led to infighting in the rebel groups. In June 2013, the United States armed Syrian rebels against Assad's regime after receiving confirmation of the regime's possession of chemical weapons. In August 2013, Assad was accused of using chemical weapons against civilians, leading to the death of 1,500 people. In September, Russia's Vladimir Putin brokered a deal with Assad for moving Syria's chemical weapons under international control and destroying their weapon's facilities. This arms treaty gave hope to the international community that there may be a solution and an end to the civil war. In January 2014 peace talks in Geneva commenced between Assad's regime and the Syrian National Coalition. In February, a second round talks took place and failed due to an inability to set an agenda. June 2014 brought presidential elections to Syria (resulted in Assad's re-election and the condemnation of the elections internationally). In the same month ISIS established itself as a new caliphate and renamed itself the Islamic State. June also saw the destruction of Syria's last chemical weapons facilities. By August, the Islamic State took control of the entire Raqqa province. In September 2014, US President Obama vowed action against the Islamic State and started combined airstrikes with Arab countries: Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar.³



Figure 1 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of ISIS, (CNN image)

HISTORY OF THE ISSUE

ISIS' ideology comes from the Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (Organization of Monotheism and Jihad) that was established in Iraq in 2004 by the Salafi-jihad Jordanian Abu Musab al Zarqawi (founder of Al Qaeda in Iraq) who joined forces with al Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden. When American troops killed Zarqawi in **2006** along with his successors, the leadership was passed on to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. Al Qaeda in Iraq joined forces with Jabhat al-Nursa and established the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham with the joint interest of establishing a Sunni majority regions of Iraq and Syria. ISIS claims its ideology on oneness of Allah and all worship other than Allah constitutes disbelief. By **2011**, as US troops had nearly all receded from Iraq, al-Baghdadi began suicide bombing missions targeted against Shiite police, military, and civilians. Following this, al-Baghdadis numbered in the thousands as former soldiers in the Sons of Iraq,

² <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-recruiting-westerners-how-islamic-state-goes-after-non-muslims-recent-converts-west-1680076>

³ <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state>



Saddam Hussein's old military, joined his movement. They were then able to mobilize into Syria, attacking its sub-sect Shiite government led by Bashar al-Assad with true military force rather than the rag tag terrorist tactics seen by most prior groups. From then on, ISIS forces imposed brutal sharia law and multiple inhumane measures on captured towns and villages in Syria. It wasn't until **2014** that Assad's forces, along with various militias, began recapturing cities and territories from ISIS.⁴ The war continues to ravage Syria with both sides committing many human rights atrocities. With regards to winning the conflict, few people can agree on whether or not we are achieving significant victories over ISIS, meaning the war will persist for the foreseeable future.

FOCUS AREAS

TERRITORY

ISIS has gained a major foothold in Iraq and Syria due to Syria's civil war that started in 2011. An exhausted and disorganized secular rebel front allowed room for Muslim extremist groups such as ISIS to move in and claim territory effectively diluting the war against Syria's president Bashar al-Assad. These rebel groups are now outnumbered by religious extremists that have aligned themselves with ISIS and have carried out brutal attacks. The conflict in Syria and subsequently the escalation of violence because of ISIS has had international ramifications and has therefore required and international response.



Image via The Atlantic

HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

Since the Syrian conflict began in 2011, 3,214,466 Syrian people have registered as **refugees**.⁵ ISIS is directly responsible for thousands of deaths in Northern Iraq and held territory in Syria.⁶ The enormous influx of **asylum seekers** has put an incredible strain the Syria's neighboring countries of Jordan and Turkey and the conditions in which refugees are living lead to illness, starvation, violence, lack of education, and child marriages. Since December 2014, there have been 12.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, 5.5 million children have been affected, 7.6 million are **internally displaced** (still in Syria but without a home), and more than 3 million are externally displaced (in countries outside of Syria).⁷ The need for international humanitarian aid and an end to the conflict is imperative to ensure the survival of Syrian asylum seekers and refugees.



Syrian Refugee Camp in Mafraq, Jordan
(Image via TIME Magazine)

⁴ <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/isis-a-short-history/376030/>

⁵ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/11/isis-iraq-numbers_n_5659239.html

⁷ <http://www.usaid.gov/crisis/syria>



INFLUENCE OF ISIS

The issue with ISIS is not regressing at this time and more action needs to be taken to stop this group from harming more people. This is a very sophisticated terrorist group with members who have military experience. Capturing and beheading journalists, massacring religious groups, and hundreds of suicide bombings are all on their resume. With the resources this group seems to have they are on a fast track to greater control over territories. With their ideal Islamic Caliphate State in mind they will go to any extreme to achieve their goals. An argument can be made that the US-led coalition designed to destroy the Islamic State has only enhanced its legitimacy. In Pakistan, sympathy from ex-Al Qaeda militants makes the country a prime area for the spread of the Islamic State. Spreading to Pakistan, however, could lead to copious amounts of bloodshed due to battles between Al Qaeda and ISIS. In western China, the Muslim Uighurs have sought out terrorist training from ISIS, according to the Chinese government, in order to establish their own country. The Islamic State-affiliate "Soldiers of the Caliphate in the Land of Algeria" took over the Gao province of Mali and instituted punishment for breaking the rules of the Qur'an. In 2016, they killed a French tourist in Algeria as a result of French participation in the fight against the Islamic State. In India there has been a rise in Islamic State sympathy and public support. A Mumbai born IS militant, Arif Ejaz Majeed, was killed making national headlines in India. Students have been photographed wearing pro IS t-shirts and filmed waving the Islamic State flag. Australia and many European countries have banned their citizens from traveling to IS-held territories.⁸

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

INTERNET TERROR

In addition to taking over crude oil fields, ISIS has targeted Western journalists and aid workers in their efforts to fund the establishment of their Islamic State, sometimes killing those they capture when their demands are not met. In addition, ISIS has proven to be capable at recruiting new members around the globe through social media aiming their messages at young Muslims. Dozens of lone wolf terror attacks/threats have popped up all across the world, with the attackers either **pledging allegiance to ISIS** or **ISIS claiming responsibility**.

The group has also built up an incredibly expansive online network in the dark web (part of the internet not accessible through major search engines), consisting of recruitment sites, social networks, and black market online bazaars. The threat is particularly large within Western Europe as ISIS targets hundreds of European national and native Muslims to join their cause.⁹



Image via Newsweek

⁸ <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/10/01/islamic-state-spread-pakistan-india-china-mali/16507043/>

⁹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jamescarafano/2016/03/16/what-makes-isis-a-global-threat/#494668631aa6>



OTHER GROUPS

While much of the international community condemns ISIS, the terrorist group is not without allies. **Boko Haram**, a terrorist group occupying Northern Nigeria which was recently responsible for mass kidnappings and executions with thousands of victims lying dead, has pledged its support for ISIS.¹⁰ Even beyond adversaries, ISIS has sparked dozens of militant populist uprisings against their jihad. The most prominent of these groups is the **Kurdish Workers Party (PKK)**, a military made up of ethnic Kurds that is fighting for their own autonomous territory within Syria, Iraq, and Turkey, and is thus pushing back ISIS.¹¹

GLOBAL ACTIONS

With all the horrors committed by ISIS and the damage they are doing to international order, the global community is taking serious steps towards destroying the terrorist group. **Lead by the United States**, there is currently a large airstrike coalition consisting of Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and several other major countries. Russia has been taking its own initiatives in bombing ISIS, which has drawn controversy because, unlike the above actors, Russia supports the Assad regime and has poor relations with Turkey, a major regional actor.¹² The UN Security Council has taken broad sweeps towards cutting off ISIS' ties to all international finances and has vigorously condemned the group's actions and ideologies.¹³

BLOC POSITIONS

WESTERN BLOC

Most prominent member: United States

Actors: United Kingdom, France, Canada, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, and Australia

Goals: To destroy the Islamic State, uphold democratic/ liberal regimes in the region, maintain economic stronghold over resources



RUSSIA BLOC

Most prominent member: Russia

Actors: Syria (Assad government), Iran, China, and Algeria

Goals: To destroy the Islamic State, but while upholding the Assad regime and rolling back Western domination over the region, especially regarding oil



¹⁰ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-31784538>

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>

¹² <http://www.businessinsider.com/7-countries-have-entered-the-fight-against-isis-2016-1>

¹³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/18/world/middleeast/united-nations-sanctions-against-isis-adopted.html>



TURKISH BLOC

Most prominent member: Turkey

Actors: Jordan and Lebanon

Goals: To destroy the Islamic State, as well as deal with the crippling refugee crisis within their territory, maintain international borders once ISIS falls



GULF STATES BLOC

Most prominent member: Saudi Arabia

Actors: United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar

Goals: Fight the Islamic State, but while maintaining sharia law and Sunni dominion over the region, preserving their oil interests, against non-Arab ethnicities in the region, prevent Western dominance



CASE STUDY: Palmyra

Background

This ancient city lies to the north of Damascus in Syria. It contains dozens of architectural structures from the 1st and 2nd centuries A.D. with buildings from Roman and Persian civilizations. It also contains thousands of valuable artifacts and other archeological treasures. The city itself was a major trade outpost in ancient Persia. To this day it is considered an invaluable cultural and heritage touchstone for the Middle East and the world.¹⁴



Image via CNN

ISIS

In May 2015, as part of their campaign in Western Iraq, ISIS launched a large military strike against the ancient city deep within Syria. The group destroyed hundreds of landmarks and leveled most of the city. They toppled entire structures, bombed countless temples and historic sites, and even cut off the heads of statues as part of their strict sharia law code.¹⁵ Other destroyed artifacts include shrines to ancient gods/goddesses, as well as Roman amphitheaters.¹⁶ ISIS has stated that destroying the ancient relics are meant to destroy any sense of historic nationalism and pride amongst Syrians and Iraqis so that the Islamic State can take up their entire mindset.¹⁷

¹⁴ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/23>

¹⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/15/middleeast/gallery/palmyra-ruins-syria/>

¹⁶ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2016/apr/08/palmyra-after-islamic-state-isis-visual-guide>

¹⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34112593>



Moving Forward

In late March of 2016, accompanied by Russian airstrikes and Shiite militias, the Syrian government was able to retake Palmyra from ISIS. The Assad government rejoiced at this victory, claiming it was symbolic of their increased success in dismantling the power of the Islamic State. Assad earned much more political capital as a result, and has now sent his government ministries fully assess the damage done so as to commence reconstruction of the city.

RESEARCH SITES

Security Council

www.un.org/eng/sc/

Amnesty International

www.amnesty.org

Human Rights Watch

www.hrw.org

Relief and Reconciliation

www.reliefandreconciliation.org